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R ROBERT PEEL

LORD ROSEBERY

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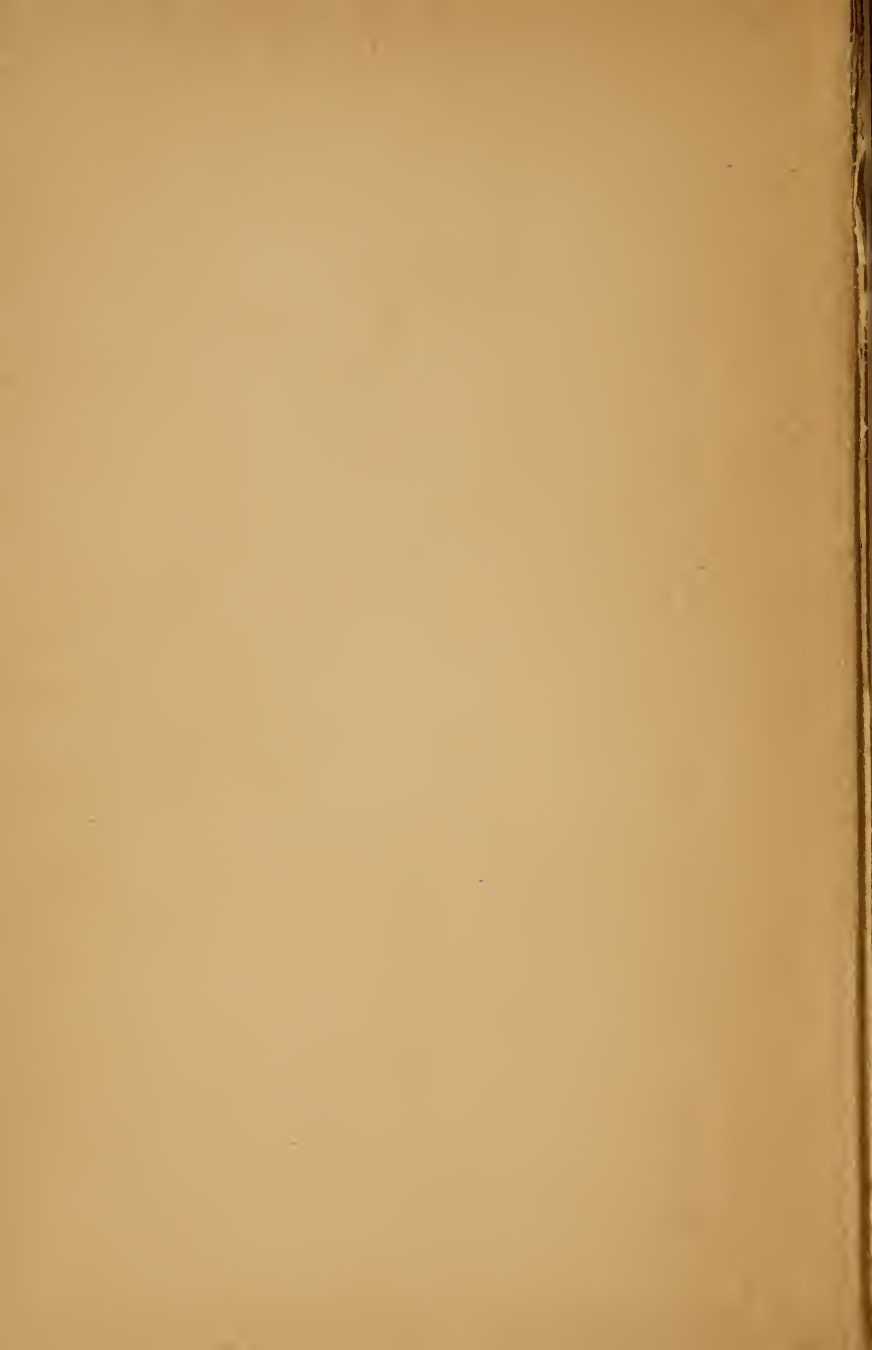


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SIR ROBERT PEEL



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BY

LORD ROSEBERY

*(REPRODUCED FROM THE ANGLO-SAXON REVIEW)*



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## SIR ROBERT PEEL.

THE historical monument to Sir Robert Peel is now almost complete, and three massive volumes set forth fully, but not redundantly, the career of a statesman who ended or commenced an epoch.

Almost, but not quite. In the first place, the present work does not pretend to be a complete biography, for it scarcely notices what has appeared elsewhere—such as the correspondence with Croker; the speeches; the appeal from Cobden on Peel's resignation and the reply to it, which is the most striking, passionate, and vivid letter of Peel's that we possess. This last we regret, though the editor has, on the whole, exercised a wise discretion; for to have taken any other course would have swollen the volumes to

an intolerable bulk. What is here attempted and achieved is the selection of all that is characteristic and interesting from the Peel papers, and so the delineation of Peel's career by himself and his correspondents.

Again, the monument to Peel will never be complete without a new edition of his speeches. The published collection in four volumes is, we believe, the least common of such publications. It contains much of permanent interest, and some models of parliamentary speaking. But it is vilely printed, and cannot be said to be edited at all. Two or three volumes of fair type and respectable paper would contain all that it is necessary to preserve. It is not much of a tribute to pay to the man who gave his fellow-countrymen "abundant and untaxed food, the sweeter because it is no longer leavened by a sense of injustice"; and without it the record of his career is still inadequate and unfair.

The course of the present biography has been strange. Six or seven years after Peel's death there appeared two volumes, prepared for publication by himself, which embraced the three capital crises of his life. Then we wait for forty years. The chests of his papers, bequeathed in solemn trust, slumber in silence: there are rumours of documents which affect living statesmen and which impose reserve: the statesmen die, and yet there is no sign: the trustees themselves die, and are replaced by others: an eminent author dips into them, and brings up a magazine article: the appetite of posterity remains whetted and unappeased: the documents remain, an unexplored treasure of political history.

There is a story that Sir Robert, in the last year of his last administration, appeared late at night in the bedroom of Cardwell, then his private secretary, and paced up and down without saying a word; Cardwell

watching with amazed perplexity from his bed. At last he broke silence. "Never destroy a letter," he oracularly said. "No public man who respects himself should ever destroy a letter." He then turned on his heel and left the room. It was understood that he was referring to the solace which might be derived, under the philippics of an alienated supporter, from the possession of the orator's applications for office. Be that as it may, we may be sure that as Sir Robert preached so did he practise. He preserved his papers, and so the most exact revelation of himself.

But now at last we have the papers, or a careful selection of them, and we feel that we have only gained by having to wait for them; as the editor may be cited as a chief among the rare masters of that fastidious calling. Laborious, conscientious, and fair, Mr. Parker is anxious never to



obtrude himself on the reader's attention. We might, indeed, wish that he had given us more illustrations derived from his close intimacy with Lord Cardwell, one of the original trustees. But with one exception—the essay at the end of the volumes—Peel is allowed to speak for himself. It must, therefore, be felt that that essay, clever and interesting as it is, is out of place. Without it, the direct and majestic delineation of the statesman is consummate and complete. The piety and enthusiasm of his descendant jar with the austere self-revelation of the man.

A portrait such as this can only be produced of one of the princes of mankind. They gain by that scrutiny which would kill and damn lesser beings. Nothing personal to them can be spared or omitted—not the wart of Cromwell, or the burlesque mask of Gibbon, or the deformed foot of Byron. It is at once their glory and their

penalty, for it is only the great in spirit and in truth that must and can endure the glare of minute biography.

How does Peel bear this test? To that question there can be, we think, but one answer—that few can endure it so well, that we have here the picture of a public career, happily not unique, but illustrious and unalloyed. It is little derogation to add that he had lived in the search-light of the world, or prepared for it, from the beginning of things. The tradition goes that on his birth his father, in a transport of pious gratitude, had on his knees vowed the baby to the service of his country, and had expressed the hope that his child might tread in the steps of his political idol, William Pitt. From his childhood, then, when he repeated to his father critical abstracts of the sermons he had heard in church, in order to strengthen his memory in view of a political career, the little Robert lived, as

it were, devoted to the public, in the very eye, so to speak, of the Muse of History.

So far back as we can discern him at all, we find him from the outset the same able, conscientious, laborious, sensitive being that we leave him at his death. But this preparation for politics was not wholly an advantage. It was carried on under the auspices of his father, who called himself a Pittite, when that name was monopolised by High Tories and High Protectionists. Peel, then, found his creed prepared for him without an option. He was sworn to Toryism before he understood the meaning of the oath. This was unfortunate, for Toryism was by no means congenial to the character of his mind. He was a representative of the great middle class, commercially a Liberal, with no aristocratic prejudice or tradition to hamper his examination of any question on its merits. His habit of mind would thus, had he been

left untrammelled, have made him a Whig, but a Whig who would have developed in the popular direction. At one time, indeed, it seemed possible that a Whig he might actually become. Arbuthnot told the Duke of Bedford that the old Sir Robert Peel had once uttered a significant warning that, if Robert were not secured by high office, he would go over to the Whigs, and be forever lost to the party. This story, on the face of it, does not seem improbable, and derives a shadowy support from a letter which the father wrote to Mr. Perceval. It is likely enough that young Peel, had he remained a free-lance, would have broken loose from the Toryism of that day. Greville, as he relates the anecdote, makes his own characteristically acid comments:—

Never [he says] did any father do a greater injury to a son, for if Peel had joined a more congenial party, he might have followed the bent of his political inclination, and would have escaped all the false positions

in which he has been placed . . . As it is, his whole life has been spent in doing enormous mischief, and in attempts to repair that mischief.

But it was otherwise fated, not perhaps for his own welfare or happiness. He was in 1829 to deal High Toryism an almost mortal blow; to re-constitute a new Toryism by patience and labour; and to shatter all in 1846.

But throughout life there was in him a streak of what we call Liberalism. The inner habit of his mind, though essentially cautious, was indeed essentially Liberal. Even in opposing the Reform Bill of 1832 he urged, as one great objection to it, that it confined the franchise to the higher and middle classes and excluded the labourers, disfranchising those possessed from time immemorial of the privilege. This was not the objection of his party, or even akin to their objections. It is, indeed, safe to say that these volumes do not present the

portrait of a Tory, as Toryism was then understood. They contain the constant protests and struggles of a candid mind against class prejudice and class jobbery. What he had in common with the old Toryism was the historical apprehension of a man born before the French Revolution; and obvious traces of this feeling may be found in a letter he wrote to Goulburn in August, 1836. It is probable that he clung to this abstract and negative principle, as a base of support for the reactionary attitudes which he was sometimes compelled to assume. But it may safely be said that in the every-day business of life, in the distribution of patronage, in the dealing with abuses, Peel worked in a spirit of severe public duty, and of constant protest against privilege, or bigotry, or jobs—a spirit alien to the older Toryism. It must, indeed, be admitted that in 1825 he wrote to Liverpool asking for preferment in the Church for one

brother, and for secular promotion for his brother-in-law, so that another brother might occupy the post held by the brother-in-law. This letter in the light of these days reads oddly enough, but then it must be read by the light of those. Peel's general stand against High Tory ideas of patronage is none the less clear and strong. And there is further to be noted, in the words of Mr. Gladstone, that, as there were two Pitts, so there were two Peels: the Peel before and the Peel after the Reform Bill. To put it otherwise, before the Reform Bill Peel was a Tory ; after it he was a Conservative. He recognised the new conditions resulting from that Bill ; he endeavoured to shape his policy and adapt his party to them. In this attempt he bent his party to the breaking point ; but for a time, by his parliamentary skill and the loyalty of Wellington, the catastrophe was averted.

Nothing, indeed, appears more clearly in

these volumes than the fact that it was only the climax of the disruption of the Tory party that was reached in 1846. Since the death of Lord Liverpool there had been an increasing fissure. In 1834-5 there was a momentary closing of the ranks, against further reform, and in support of the spirited stand made by Peel. The old Duke of Newcastle—the very pontiff of High Toryism—mindful, perhaps, that Peel had defended him in the House of Commons, had tendered to Peel an elaborate support, and had offered, with superfluous ardour, to accompany him to the scaffold. At the same time, being against every description of reform, wholesale and retail, his “satisfaction at seeing Peel at the head of affairs was not pure and unmixed.” When, however, a Newcastle could affect even a moderate contentment with Peel, High Toryism could support him with apparent cordiality. But, between the fall of Peel’s



Government in 1835 and his return to office in 1841, the difficulty of combining the extreme and moderate sections of his party taxed all his resources. Peel himself in his later years, after his final resignation, wrote as follows: "On reflecting on all that passed, I am much more surprised that the union was so long maintained than that it was ultimately severed." And in July, 1845, Prince Albert, a shrewd and close observer, writes to Stockmar:—

In politics we are drawing near the close of one of the most remarkable sittings of parliament. Peel has carried through everything with immense majorities, but it is certain that he has no longer any stable parliamentary support. His party is quite broken up, and the Opposition has as many different opinions and principles as heads.

He had to experience, as Pitt had before him, the difficulties that attend a Liberal Minister governing by a majority of old Tories; while his strength lay, negatively,

in a Liberal opposition, distracted by multifarious principles and conflicting chiefs.

By the word "Tory" no reference is, of course, here intended to the party now existing, which is sometimes called by that name, which can scarcely be said to have survived, even in a languishing condition, the cataclysm of 1846, and which finally disappeared in 1867. Since then there have been Tories in name, or Tories of a different kind. Lord Beaconsfield loved to call himself a Tory, so did Lord Randolph Churchill. But the followers of this last were commonly identified as Tory-Democrats, a conjunction of terms which sufficiently explains the change. What would Sidmouth, or Eldon, or Sir Robert Harry Inglis have said to such a combination? An imaginary conversation between one of them and a Tory-Democrat would transcend the imagination of a Landor, unless indeed he resorted to the compendious forms of the Communion Service. No:

what is meant by Tories, relatively to Sir Robert Peel's career, is a party opposed to the Whigs; and the Whigs of 1840 would be considered by many Tories of to-day to be retrograde and fossil politicians. The Tories of Sir Robert's time cherished the names of Eldon, Sidmouth, and Inglis. He himself acknowledged the discrepancy between himself and them by adopting the term "Conservative."

From the time of Roman Catholic emancipation, if not earlier, there had reigned an atmosphere of distrust round Peel. His reserve, his awkwardness, a certain slyness of eye, which appears in some of his portraits, may account for this as much as the suspicion of Liberal tendencies, though this also prevailed. That expression of the eye is noticed by Disraeli in the study of Peel which he wrote for his *Life of Lord George Bentinck*. "The eye," he says, "was not good: it was sly, and had an awkward habit

of looking askance." It does not appear that anything in Peel's public or private career justifies the imputation of slyness. His shyness may have given him occasionally the "awkward habit of looking askance." The sly expression of the eye was probably the indication not of cunning, but of humour. For even on public and solemn occasions Sir Robert was known not to be deficient in that saving salt; though its full abundance has only been revealed in these last years. His reputation in that respect rested on the famous passage in the speech of May 18th, 1841, often quoted, but too good to leave unquoted as we pass.

Great as is my commiseration, I cannot assist you. I view with unaffected sympathy the position of the right honourable gentleman the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It has been remarked that a good man struggling with adversity is a sight worthy of the gods. And certainly the right honourable gentleman, *both with respect to the goodness of the man and the extent of his adversity*, presents at the present moment that spectacle.

Can there be a more lamentable picture than that of a Chancellor of the Exchequer seated on an empty chest, by the pool of bottomless deficiency, fishing for a budget? I won't bite: the right honourable gentleman shall return home with his pannier as empty as his chest.

That passage is classical. But during the last decade there has been abundant proof that the humour lurking in Peel's eye represented a strong but severely repressed characteristic of the man. Carlyle, who was, at any rate, an admirable portrait-painter, had noticed this. "A warm sense of fun, really of genuine broad drollery, looks through him; the hopefulest feature I could clearly see." Rogers, too, who had seen everybody and noticed everything, was alive to the occasional flashes of Peel's humour. Once, he tells us, at a meeting of the Trustees of the British Museum, someone mentioned young Tomline's costly purchases of pictures, adding, "What would the Bishop say, if he could now look up?"

"I observe," remarked Peel, "you don't say 'look down!'" But perhaps it finds its most frequent vent in his letters to Croker, written at the time when he trusted Croker. Mr. Parker too, especially in his first volume, gives several letters with that same happy note; nor is it even absent during Peel's last desperate session as Prime Minister, when, in the House of Commons, he bantered the Recorder of Dublin with regard to the housemaid: "*Ne sit ancillæ tibi amor pudori.*" Sir William Gregory, who saw him often at this period, has told of his fun, sometimes broad, his ready stories, his robust fits of laughter, and quotes Lord Strangford to a similar effect. Even in the solemn moment between his resignation and resumption of power in December 1845, Greville tells us that Peel was full of jokes and stories, enlivening a hilarious Cabinet. All this seems worth notice, for it does not represent the ordinary view of Peel.

With regard to another force of Peel's nature, equally strong and almost equally suppressed—his fiery temper—Mr. Parker adds something to what was already known. He records how Peel called out Townshend, his opponent at Tamworth in the 1837 election. He tells us what is to be told of the abortive duel with O'Connell. He gives us the correspondence in which Peel called Hume to account for "expressions not consistent with the usages of Parliament"; and that in which he exacts an apology from Hobhouse. He narrates the painful scene in the House of Commons when Peel lost his self-control under an attack by Cobden, ill-timed and ill-expressed, but not that when, with inexplicable fury, he repelled a contemptible cannonade from Cobbett. There is, moreover, we have always understood, but little doubt that at one time he had it in contemplation to challenge Mr. Disraeli; though on this point the papers

are silent. But scarcely in the Irish Parliament, or in Lever's novels, is there any memory of so peppery a politician with so constant an inclination to the "sawhandles." There is, indeed, ample documentary proof, besides the tradition of those who knew him, that the cold, cautious exterior of Peel concealed a highly-strung, nervous temperament, and a prompt pugnacity which we can scarcely realise in these days.

But, except in regard to these two points, there is nothing in these volumes to vary materially the popular conception of Peel's habit of mind. To work hard had always been his practice. "Work," Dean Cyril Jackson had early exhorted him, "work like a tiger, or like a dragon, if dragons work more and harder than tigers." And in his last tenure of office Peel speaks of himself more than once as working seventeen hours a day. Even with that desperate diet of labour it seems difficult to understand how



Peel accomplished all that he did at that time.

For he was the model of all Prime Ministers. It is more than doubtful, indeed, if it be possible in this generation, when the burdens of empire and of office have so incalculably grown, for any Prime Minister to discharge the duties of his high post with the same thoroughness or in the same spirit as Peel. To do so would demand more time and strength than any man has at his command. For Peel kept a strict supervision over every department: he seems to have been master of the business of each and all of them. He was conversant with all departmental questions, and formed and enforced opinions on them. And, though he had an able Chancellor of the Exchequer, in whom he had full confidence, he himself introduced his great Budget of 1842 and that of 1845. The War Office, the Admiralty, the Foreign

Office, the administrations of India and of Ireland felt his personal influence as much as the Treasury or the Board of Trade.

In the House of Commons he, with Graham, mainly bore the burden, so much to the exclusion of even so brilliant a colleague as Stanley, that we find this last demanding his removal to the House of Lords, on the ground that business in the House of Commons was done entirely by Peel, Goulburn, Graham, and Gladstone, and that he had therefore become a cypher: an extraordinary testimony, when we reflect that this Stanley, for whom no use could be found, was incomparably the first debater in Parliament. Charles Villiers, an opponent, but even then a practised parliamentarian, offered evidence of equal weight: "See how those two men (Peel and Graham) do their business and understand it." It is probable, then, that no

Prime Minister ever fulfilled so completely and thoroughly the functions of his office, parliamentary, administrative, and general, as Sir Robert Peel; though it may perhaps be found that Peel's greatest pupil followed in his footsteps during the famous administration which began in 1868. But in these days of instant, continuous, and unrelenting pressure, the very tradition of such a minister has almost departed; indeed, it would be impossible to be so paternal and ubiquitous. A minister of these days would be preparing or delivering a speech in the country, when Peel would be writing minutes of policy for the various departments. Which occupation is the better or more fruitful is not now in question: it is sufficient for our purpose that the difference exists.

Nor, perhaps, would such a minister be now altogether welcome to his colleagues. For Peel was in name and in deed that

functionary so abhorred and repudiated by the statesmen of the eighteenth century—a Prime Minister. With a collection of colleagues perhaps unparalleled for ability and brilliancy he stood among them like Alexander among his Parmenios and Ptolemies. In these days we have returned, perhaps necessarily, to the views of the last century. A Prime Minister who is the senior partner in every department as well as president of the whole, who deals with all the business of government, who inspires and vibrates through every part, is almost, if not quite, an impossibility. A first minister is the most that can be hoped for, the chairman and on most occasions the spokesman of that board of directors which is called the Cabinet; who has the initiation and guidance of large courses of public policy; but who does not, unless specially invoked, interfere departmentally.

Peel, himself, in 1845—more than half a century ago—had arrived at the conclusion that the task of a Prime Minister in the House of Commons, as he understood the office, had become almost impossible. In August 1845 he writes:—

I defy the minister of this country to perform properly the duties of his office—to read all that he ought to read, including the whole foreign correspondence; to keep up the constant communication with the Queen, *and the Prince*; to see all whom he ought to see; to superintend the grant of honours and the disposal of civil and ecclesiastical patronage; to write with his own hand to every person of note who chooses to write to him; to be prepared for every debate, including the most trumpery concerns; to do all these indispensable things, and also sit in the House of Commons eight hours a day for one hundred and eighteen days.

It is impossible for me not to feel that the duties are incompatible and above all human strength—at least, above mine.

The worst of it is that the really important duties to the country—those out of the House of Commons—are apt to be neglected.

I never mean to solve the difficulty in one way—

namely, by going to the House of Lords. But it must be solved in one way or another. The failure of the mind is the usual way, as we know from sad experience.

This is surely a striking pronouncement. His detail of his duties, his speaking of himself as "the minister of this country," which defines in a phrase his view of his position, his indication of the real danger, long since realised, that administrative must necessarily be neglected for parliamentary duties, his allusion in the last sentence to Liverpool and Castlereagh are all noteworthy. So is his declaration that he would never take refuge in the House of Lords. In Martin's "Life of the Prince Consort" (i. 266), it is stated, on the authority of Mr. Anson and Lord Aberdeen, that Peel had come to the conclusion that the Prime Minister should be in that House. The question has scarcely more than an historic interest, since the conditions are

no longer the same. But it is impossible, even as a matter of historic interest, altogether to ignore any definite opinion on such a subject, pronounced by so consummate a master of his craft.

What is a Prime Minister? That is a question which it would require a pamphlet to answer, but in a few sentences it may be possible to remove a few hallucinations. For the title expresses much to the British mind. To the ordinary apprehension it implies a dictator, the duration of whose power finds its only limit in the House of Commons. So long as he can weather that stormful and deceptive ocean he is elsewhere supreme. But the reality is very different. The Prime Minister, as he is now called, is technically and practically the Chairman of an Executive Committee of the Privy Council, or rather perhaps of Privy Councillors, the influential foreman of an executive jury. His power is

mainly personal, the power of individual influence. That influence, whatever it may be, he has to exert in many directions before he can have his way. He has to deal with the Sovereign, with the Cabinet, with Parliament, and with public opinion, all of them potent factors in their various kinds and degrees. To the popular eye, however, heedless of these restrictions, he represents universal power; he is spoken of as if he had only to lay down his views of policy and to adhere to them. That is very far from the case. A First Minister has only the influence with the Cabinet which is given him by his personal arguments, his personal qualities, and his personal weight. But this is not all. All his colleagues he must convince, some he may have to humour, some even to cajole: a harassing, laborious, and ungracious task. Nor is it only his colleagues that he has to deal with: he has to masticate their



pledges, given before they joined him, he has to blend their public utterances, to fuse as well as may be all this into the policy of the Government: for these various records must be reconciled, or glossed, or obliterated. A machinery liable to so many grains of sand requires obviously all the skill and vigilance of the best conceivable engineer. And yet without the external support of his Cabinet he is disarmed. The resignation of a colleague, however relatively insignificant, is a storm signal.

Nothing, indeed, is more remarkable than the cohesion of Cabinets, except that strange institution itself. To the Briton, who found it existing at his birth, it seems the natural if not the inevitable form of government. To the inquiring foreigner, however, nothing can seem more extraordinary, in a country with so much of democracy about it, than the spectacle of a secret council, on the Venetian model,

and sworn to absolute silence, conducting the business of a nation which insists on publicity for everything less important. The secrecy of the Cabinet in such a condition of things would resemble, one would surmise, the secrecy of the ostrich—the material fact would be visible to all while a shallow head was embedded in the sand. But it is not so. The secrets of the Cabinet are, as a rule, preserved. After the sharpest internal discords the members will present a united, even if a silent and sullen, front. Whether the system of Cabinet government be an efficient one or not is not now the question: whether the collection of the heads of departments at sparse intervals to discuss hurriedly topics, for which they are often unprepared, be a good arrangement for business is not the point: but what may confidently be asserted is that of all anomalous arrangements for executive government in an Anglo-Saxon community, during the

present epoch and under the present conditions, the strangest is the government of the British Empire by a secret committee. That it works well, on the whole, is a tribute less to the institution itself than to the capacity of our race to make any conceivable institution succeed.

Of course, it may be said that the public and the Press are excluded from the counsels of all executives. But it will be found not infrequently elsewhere, that the conclusions at which executives have arrived are announced to the public. In Britain it may safely be said that this is never, or scarcely ever, the case. Nor is even the subject of discussion ever known, though enterprising editors make spirited conjectures on the subject, which sometimes take the form of authoritative paragraphs. Practically, then, during the whole of the parliamentary recess at least, we have not the faintest idea of what our rulers are

doing, or planning, or negotiating, except in so far as light is afforded by the independent investigations of the Press. This is said in a spirit, not of criticism or deprecation, but rather of meditation—which, however, must not be allowed to allure us too far from our subject.

Of this secret committee, such as it is, the Prime Minister is the chairman. He is also the channel by which its decisions reach the Sovereign. We do not know how Peel acquitted himself in the first capacity, though we think it probable that he left something to be desired; but in the second he acquitted himself admirably. He had, in 1841, to surmount, perhaps, some memories of the difficulties which had prevented his accepting office in 1839; though between 1839 and 1841 these had been removed by the tact and wisdom of the Prince Consort, acting on behalf of the Sovereign. But nothing is more delightful

than the account of his relations with the Queen and her young husband. There is a paternal, tender note which seems infinitely graceful in a man of his cold and awkward reserve. Had he been more genial, more tactful, more a man of the world, the difficulty of the Household in 1839 would have easily been overcome. But as the relations of the Sovereign and the minister became more constant and definite, when the one was able to see how warm a heart, how wise and generous a nature was concealed under a formal exterior, when the other realised that no natural prepossessions would prevent fair play to the new Government, mutual appreciation was easy and complete; until it culminated in the scene of December 20th, 1845, when the Queen required the minister to remain in her service, and the minister replied, as he records himself, "I want no consultations, no time for reflection. I will be your

minister, happen what may. I will do without a colleague rather than leave you in this extremity." Comment or addition would only mar so chivalrous a picture.

The relations with the Sovereign are, however, only a part, though they may be the pleasantest part, of the Prime Minister's personal relations. He has, as has already been pointed out, to keep in such touch with his Cabinet that they may act cordially with him.

Here Peel in one great instance may be said to have been less successful. He did not, indeed, owe everything, but he owed much, to the Duke of Wellington. Without Wellington, Catholic Emancipation could not have been carried in 1829. Wellington consented to act as warming-pan for Peel in 1834. He helped Peel loyally, sometimes against his own convictions, in conducting Opposition from 1835 to 1841. Without Wellington, it is safe to say that Peel could

not have maintained himself in 1845-6. The loyal old soldier acted not from any particular sympathy for Peel, but from a stern resolve that the Queen's Government should be carried on. This is not to say that he was an altogether easy colleague, but it is to establish that Peel was bound to him by every tie of gratitude and interest. These volumes, however, teem with proofs that Peel took little pains to keep the Duke in a good humour, that he communicated with him as little as possible, that their relations were sometimes strained, and that Arbuthnot, the Duke's bosom friend, was instant at all seasons to try and bring about more intimate consultation. Over and over again he intimates in various forms, as if the statement were a startling novelty, that the Duke, "if he has a weakness," has the weakness of liking to be consulted. Peel on one occasion answers that he knows of no pleasure comparable to that of consulting

the Duke. But he showed a singular self-denial in availing himself of this gratification. Sometimes common friends intervene. On one occasion, in answer to such expostulation, Peel confesses himself aggrieved, and states with his usual moderation the causes of offence. But in any case the result is always the same: renewed want of intercourse, renewed complaints, and, at most, communication through the channel of Arbuthnot.

One short correspondence is, however, so fascinating that it deserves to be noticed. Sir Robert's second son, William, then a midshipman—afterwards, in the Crimea and in India, so famous and beloved—writes home to his father an account of the naval operations on the coast of Syria in 1840. Peel, breaking through his habitual reserve, sends the letter to the Duke, who returns it with rare commendation. The delight of the father is as irrepressible as it is charming,



and forms a grateful oasis in his relations with his illustrious colleague.

Strangely enough, if one turns to Greville, one finds almost the same complaint of the Duke. In 1841 Wellington had, it seems, fallen into strange and morbid ways. Once so accessible, he would see no one. Once so fond of being consulted, he avoided everything of the kind—indeed, all communications with his fellow-creatures. He retired for a time into a gloomy and silent solitude, denying access to everyone with passionate and almost brutal vehemence. It is not probable that this fit lasted long. But it is only fair to note the fact in the controversy as between Peel and the Duke.

That there were faults on both sides is probable. It is impossible, however, not to feel that Peel was the most to blame. The position and qualities and age of Wellington were such as demanded an attention little short of homage. When Peel was still

a Harrow schoolboy, Wellington had won Assaye. When Peel entered Parliament, Wellington had stemmed the universal dominion of France, and before Peel was eight and twenty, had put an end to it. He was incomparably the first, the most illustrious, the most venerable of living Englishmen. What his political services had been to Peel has already been stated. He had, moreover, for many years endeavoured to bring a hostile House of Lords into harmony with Peel's views, and by his matchless authority had succeeded. Peel, it is clear, should have taken endless pains to gratify and conciliate the supreme old man. If he took any, or any but the slightest, it does not appear in the present biography.

With others of his colleagues he laboured more effectually. For example, Ellenborough had proceeded to India as Governor-General. Even before his arrival at Calcutta the

restless and exuberant vanity of the new Viceroy had displayed itself in an ominous manner. After he had landed a few weeks it developed a thousand-fold. His predecessor he offended by the careless candour of his egotism. He outraged two successive Presidents of the Board of Control. He flouted the Court of Directors. His generals, Nott and Pollock, he openly denounced as incompetent; but afterwards arrogated, or seemed to arrogate, to himself the merit of their achievements. He wished to have a commission that would enable him to command the army himself. Without it, he followed the army with the pomp and parade of a Xerxes. He undertook daring, and in Peel's judgment unjustifiable, measures of policy without consultation with any home authority. In one part of a letter to Hardinge he hints at a march to the Dardanelles, in another at the conquest of Egypt. In fine, there never was, it would

appear, with all his ability, so impossible a Governor-General.

But to read Peel's correspondence with him, and with Fitzgerald and Ripon, his official chiefs, is a lesson in itself. The tact, the sagacity, the patience, are as rare as they are admirable. Swollen with arrogant importance, Ellenborough disdained the post in the Cabinet offered to him by Peel when he returned from India, intimating that Cabinet office was beneath the notice of one whose mind was devoted to sublimer subjects. Peel turns away with a smile.

With Stanley, if we may judge from this biography, he was never cordial. Nor is this wonderful, for perhaps no two men were ever endowed with more opposite natures than these two Lancashire leaders; though it seems probable, fiery as was Stanley, that Peel's was the more fiery nature of the two. So, too, they both had humour. But Lord Dalling reports a

tradition that Peel suffered much under the irrepressible banter of Stanley ; to such an extent, indeed, as to have resolved to be rid of him. It has been remarked by an eminent writer that a difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections. But we doubt if it has ever seriously strained those of a Cabinet ; we feel sure that it never produced a schism in Peel's. Indeed, the tradition is in itself a joke. Nor do we find any trace of intimacy between the not less brilliant Lyndhurst and the Prime Minister. Ripon and Fitzgerald have to be soothed under the irritating vagaries of Ellenborough, and are dexterously appeased. Of Mr. Gladstone we catch only glimpses, mainly at the time of his resignation in 1845. Then he perplexed his chief, who complains of sometimes finding great difficulty in exactly comprehending what he means. But that was not wholly surprising. Mr. Gladstone's

resignation was based on a high and honourable refinement, arrived at during a period of stress, if not of transition. It was consequently not easy to explain. Moreover, First Ministers usually find a difficulty in understanding the intellectual processes of colleagues who wish to resign.

Yet Gladstone writes of Peel in 1853 as "my great master and teacher in public affairs." The younger Newcastle, too, declares "*He* is my leader still, though invisible. I never take a step in public life without reflecting, how would he have thought of it." But with three exceptions we only see the ministers dimly. With these three, however, Peel's relations were warm and intimate.

Lady Peel, in the exquisite letter which she addressed to Lord Aberdeen a month after her bereavement, says: "My beloved one always talked of you as *the friend* whom he most valued, for whom he had the

sincerest affection, whom he esteemed higher than any." From this testimony there can be no appeal (though it may be contrasted with Peel's letter to Graham, of July 3rd, 1846), but it finds little support in the present biography. Aberdeen inspired the warmest regard in those who penetrated beneath a somewhat cold and taciturn exterior. Both the Queen and Mr. Gladstone seem to have felt for him an affection which it is rare for statesmen to attract. But in the correspondence with Peel this is not so apparent. Indeed, there was once a crisis. For Aberdeen felt so complete a trust in France and the government of Louis Philippe that he and Guizot were, it is complacently stated, on the footing rather of colleagues than ministers of different countries; they showed each other their despatches, and exchanged their secret letters. This anticipation of a political millennium seemed to the British

Cabinet premature. At any rate, they declined to allow it to extinguish a modest scheme of national defence. Thereupon Aberdeen tendered his resignation: "a policy of friendship and confidence" had, he thought, "been converted into a policy of hostility and distrust." On the other hand, the Cabinet agreed with the Duke of Wellington in thinking that nothing would so much contribute to friendly relations with France as the placing ourselves in a position of efficient security. Guizot protested, and declared that "the ancient maxim, '*si vis pacem, para bellum*,' had become dangerous and absurd." Peel summed up the controversy with tact and judgment. The ancient maxim might be unwise, but he certainly doubted if the converse were true. "I do not believe that there would be security for peace by our being in a state which would unfit us to repel attack without several months'



preparation." The controversy is worthy of attentive study, for it relates to a subject of capital and permanent interest. But the point on which it touches our present purpose is that the note of the correspondence does not seem very close or cordial, though Peel declares that he should consider the loss of Aberdeen as irreparable.

That lack of expansiveness would not, perhaps, be so noticeable did we not read the correspondence with Aberdeen beside that with Graham and with Hardinge. Had it not been for the letter of Lady Peel quoted above, it would appear to the impartial reader that the colleague whom Peel most trusted was Graham, and most loved was Hardinge.

Constant consultation on all points of policy and administration point to Graham as Peel's right-hand man. So, too, does their close concurrence of view. In 1842,

for example, they seem to have been agreed that the repeal of the Corn Laws was only a question of time, and of a short time. But, on all questions, day by day, Peel and Graham keep in touch. "I have never doubted for a moment," wrote Graham in 1845, "your kind support in every difficulty. It has never failed me, and happily the most cordial agreement in feelings and in opinions prevails between us." And, when the battle was over, and the minister had gloriously fallen, Peel writes to Graham: "With what pleasure shall we talk over the stirring events of the last five years. Your cordial support and entire and unreserved confidence have been my chief stay." And Graham replied: "I shall remember our past union with pride, and I hope that till the end of our lives we may never be divided."

But the correspondence of Peel and Hardinge touches a still more exquisite

note. There had always been a peculiar closeness of friendship between the two men. On at least two occasions Hardinge had been named as Peel's second in his projected duels. One would, indeed, infer from Hardinge's letters that there is no service that he would have refused to one for whom he felt the most generous form of hero worship. When Hardinge goes to India as Viceroy, the Prime Minister finds time to write to him constantly in terms of confidence and affection which distinguish these from all his other letters, and which as the recipient declares "give me energy to work." One ends "most affectionately yours," a rare form with Peel; another, in the heat of the Corn Law struggle, written from the Cabinet, "God bless you, my dear Hardinge. Excuse my hurried letter. I am fighting a desperate battle here; shall probably drive my opponents over the Sutlej: but

what is to come afterwards I know not." One almost, as one reads, hears the beating of the writer's heart. And the correspondence as between Viceroy and minister closes with an almost impassioned testimony of sympathy and devotion from Hardinge.

If any letters more noble in themselves, or more creditable to the writers and their school, have passed between two public men, we cannot call them to mind. Nor is it difficult to understand why such letters should be rare. There is never a calm on the political ocean: its most serene temper is the ground swell which follows, or the grim stillness which precedes, the storm, often more awful than the storm itself. The unresting waves seldom permit politicians to remain in close cordiality for any length of time. The billow that bears one friend buoyantly on its bosom lands the other high and dry, sometimes among strangers, sometimes among enemies. Con-

stant changes of atmosphere produce constantly new combinations. And so the correspondence of statesmen who have survived their first ingenuous enthusiasm is apt, in view of possible contingencies, to be clouded with a forbidding wariness.

With politicians at large Peel was not exuberant. He was beset by the busy attentions of Croker; and his letters to Croker before 1827 are the happiest specimens of his youthful period. He was tormented in his later years by the irrepressible amity of Brougham, from which he disengaged himself with tact and skill. Of his relations with Disraeli it is only necessary to say this much—apart from the famous correspondence itself—that Disraeli was, probably, in every way, in appearance, in style, in manner, profoundly antipathetic to Peel; and that Peel not improbably was wholly wanting in that cordiality or attention which might have appeased a pique

which became implacable. Peel can scarcely be blamed for not perceiving, as Lyndhurst did, the wild and strange genius which was concealed under the rings and the ringlets, the velvets and the waistcoats, of the young Jewish coxcomb. There was something in all this too Bohemian and garish for Sir Robert. But, at any rate, he must have understood that the pen of Disraeli was a power, that he was a member of the House of Commons having influence with other young members; and that, even if unwilling to try him in political harness, it was worth the while of the leader of the House to attempt to keep him in good humour. Such an effort seems to have been repugnant, or impossible, to Peel. And the complaint of Disraeli is not without dignity and even pathos: "Pardon me if I now observe, with frankness but with great respect, that you might have found some reason for this [deficiency in hearty goodwill] if you had

cared to do so, in the want of courtesy in debate which I have had the frequent mortification of experiencing from you, since your accession to power." The applications for office and the subsequent denial of them are happily outside our scope. But, as to the philippics arising from Peel's refusal, it may perhaps be felt by politicians that it would be a churlish and mawkish morality which would deny to baffled ambition the natural outlet of invective and lampoon.

There is another aspect of a Prime Minister's relations with mankind scarcely less difficult than his communications with colleagues, political writers, and members of Parliament. Patronage Peel always detested, or believed himself to detest. "The odious power which patronage confers," he calls it in his famous letter to Cobden. But the Prime Minister is the guardian of the honours of the Crown, and

he discharged this duty with a fidelity, a wise caution, a pervading sense of responsibility, of which the very traditions have almost faded away. What is perhaps most important of all, he remembered that each case was capable of becoming a precedent of the largest and most distorted application. And so the chapter on patronage reads to us like a dream, like a chapter dropped from the annals of some Utopia or Atlantis. In five years Peel only recommended the creation of five peerages—all for marked public service. His last great government of 1841 has not left a single name on the British baronage. We can scarcely, as we read, believe that this period occurred only fifty years ago. Peel had adopted this superhuman strictness owing to the “immense additions recently made to the House of Lords.” What would he have said had he lived in the last quarter of the century?

And yet, even as it was, he felt that



the whole world was bursting prematurely into blossom. "The distinction of being without an honour is becoming," he writes with sardonic gravity, "a rare and valuable one, and should not become extinct." And again:

There would not be a simple squire in the land, if the fever for honours were not checked. I never yet met with a man in Ireland [he adds] who had not himself either refused honours from the Crown or was not the son of a man, or had not married the daughter of a man, who had been hard-hearted enough to refuse the solicitations of the Government. In general it is a peerage that has been refused.

To Monckton Milnes he writes:—

You will quite understand me that it is from the unfeigned respect I have for the talents of your father that I advise him to retain the distinction of not being a baronet.

This is cynical enough, but it is the cynicism of a purpose to maintain a principle, which is perhaps better than the

cynicism which neither investigates nor refuses.

To Hallam, to the father of Mr. Gladstone, and to Sir Moses Montefiore he offered baronetcies. To Wordsworth and Tennyson and Owen he gave pensions. Death interposed to prevent a similar favour to Hood. "Dear Sir," wrote Hood, "we are not to meet in the flesh," and adds with pathetic pleasantry, "it is death that stops my pen, you see, not a pension." The care and delicacy and conscience with which he treated his patronage seem to us not the least of Peel's claims to our admiration as a minister.

We have endeavoured thus briefly and hastily to consider him from his administrative and personal aspects as Prime Minister, but even thus we have left ourselves little space to consider it from the aspects which mainly appeal to the public—policy and Parliament. Still an attempt

must at least be made to consider Peel as a parliamentary and political leader.

In a country like ours, great and, indeed, disproportionate importance attaches to a minister's faculty of public speaking. The greatest of statesmen, the most consummate administrators, the most sound and fertile projectors of public measures, avail little in a parliamentary nation without the power of explaining, and, so to speak, advertising themselves. This in itself is not a subject for complacency. Nations are built up in silence. Their addiction to oratory is usually a sign of decadence. But in any case the fact remains, and makes it necessary to examine for a moment this part of Peel's equipment.

It is almost sufficient to say, in a sentence, that his speeches represent the best and most potent style of speaking for the days in which he lived and the parliaments in which he sat: grave, dignified, weighty,

with the roll of phrase which veils so many defects, and which in an argument acts as a permanent saving clause. There are no alarming flights, and no shivering falls: no torrents or cascades: but an ample flow, clear and strong and abiding. Speeches, as a rule, even the best, are as evanescent as fireworks or thistle-down: they are explored for untimely quotation during the speaker's life, and when that useful purpose ceases at his death, they cease to be opened at all: they are even less read than old sermons, which possess an elect public of their own. There are, however, a few of Peel's speeches which are still classical, still consulted by experts; such as the speech on Repeal of the Irish Union in 1834, or on the Currency in 1844, or on Free Trade in 1849. There are, too, such speeches as that in 1817 on Roman Catholic Emancipation, the subjects of which have lost

something of their savour, but which are read by those who desire to study great parliamentary arguments. A great parliamentary argument is a noble work of art, and one that Peel could always achieve. But beyond that limit he could not pass. It is not possible to conceive his arousing enthusiasm, or rising to the tender or the sublime. An acute and experienced journalist used to say that it was always possible to tell when Peel was beginning the peroration which he had written or prepared—there was a mechanical change. To a generation which has glowed with the gradually swelling perorations of Gladstone and of Bright this suggests a shortcoming, and, indeed, these efforts of Peel's do not much impress the reader—not even the most famous of all, that on his resignation in 1846. But, when all is said and done, any wise leader of the House of Commons would gladly surrender all chance

of an occasional inspiration of the highest eloquence for so consummate a parliamentary instrument as the speaking faculty of Sir Robert Peel.

Of his voice Disraeli says that it was admirable; on the whole the finest heard in his day, except perhaps the thrilling tones of O'Connell. But with all its excellence it may be doubted if it attained the rich and melodious tones of his son, the late Sir Robert, which have been extolled as supreme by both Mr. Gladstone and Lord Beaconsfield. "With such an organ," said the last, "he might have achieved anything." "I have only known two perfect things," the former is reputed to have said, "the handwriting of Lord Palmerston, and the voice of (this) Sir Robert Peel."

As a leader in the House of Commons, on either side of the House, he had great excellences. His knowledge of that grega-

rious, wayward assembly was complete, and his tact when dealing with it, except on the rare occasions when his passion mastered him, unerring. But his manner with his followers was, it is said, shy, ungraceful, and ungenial. This is the commonest charge brought against leaders, and it is easy to understand how often, when oppressed with cares known only to themselves, they find it difficult to assume a genial briskness in the lobby. There can, however, be little doubt that Peel, reserved with his closest colleagues, was not expansive to his followers, and that the twin curses of shyness and self-consciousness condemned him to that awkward manner, "haughtily stiff, or exuberantly bland," to which his party never accustomed itself.

One or two lights on the more important side of his parliamentary tactics are, however, obtainable—partly from himself.

He was in the first place extremely careful as to the perfection of the measures which he proposed to Parliament. He made it, we are told, a point of honour to prepare his bills so that they should pass with little amendment. And consequently he was able, just after he had finally left office, to write: "I pique myself on never having proposed anything that I have not carried." A proud and perhaps unrivalled boast, founded on elaboration and foresight, never likely to be repeated in these more listless and slatternly times.

Disraeli, whose brilliant sketch of Peel seems to us, with some reserves, neither ill-natured nor unfair, thinks that he carried this pride in his measures too far. He tells us that even after the election of 1834, Peel, though in a minority, did not despair. "I have," he said, "confidence in my measures." His commentator justly insinuates that the bills proposed by an



archangel in office would not conciliate an opposition in a majority. This is true enough, and pity 'tis 'tis true. But there is a spirit in Peel's remark, unworldly though it be, which is not ungrateful to that great controlling mass of the nation which eventually puts measures before majorities: though it may be admitted that the Tadpoles and the Tapers, wriggling under their exhausted receivers, can never understand it.

Another light on Peel's qualities as a leader is afforded by himself:—

I would not [he writes in March 1845] admit any alteration in any of those bills. This was thought very obstinate and very presumptuous; but the fact is, people like a certain degree of obstinacy and presumption in a minister. They abuse him for dictation and arrogance, but they like being governed.

There is probably much truth in this, but it indicates a sort of veiled autocracy in Peel, which is also perceptible in his readiness to stand alone in 1828 and 1846;

the result of an honest self-confidence; but significant also of his aloofness from his party.

Aloof from his party he certainly was. In the Tom, Dick, and Harry business, as it may be called, he was certainly deficient: it is the charge brought against all great ministers. But he had one crowning merit which finds its place in any view of him as a parliamentary leader. He had disciples: he made men: he formed a school. Of no other minister since Pitt can this be said, and even of Pitt only in a lesser degree. What men he shaped! What a creed of honest work he left with them! What a tradition of public duty! Graham, Gladstone, Hardinge, Dalhousie, Canning, Cardwell, Sidney Herbert, and Newcastle. These men stood together after his death like the last square of a broken army, firm in their faith, in their leader, in their cause. To be a Peelite was a distinction

in itself : it denoted statesmanship, industry, conscience. In the course of years the froward currents of politics tumbled them hither and thither ; death dealt hardly with them ; for only two of those we have named were in public life a decade after Peel's death ; but to the end they bore the marks of Peelism, the high sense of public duty, the unlimited estimate of labour and devotion. Such men and their principles were a precious national possession : nothing of the kind, so far as we know, has ever taken their place. Our wolves are not, it is to be supposed, of the breed that suckled them.

So much for Peel in Parliament and as regards the stamp he left on part at least of Parliament. With regard to Peel as a statesman there is one preliminary remark which must be made. He was at his greatest, not in power, but in a minority. This, so far as we know, is peculiar to

him: it can be said of no other Prime Minister. Yet no one who examines Peel's life can doubt that, of the two epochs in his life when he stood supreme, the first was the period in 1834-35 when England waited breathlessly for his return from Rome, when he formed a Government, and, after a hopeless struggle against a party overwhelming in numbers, elated by enfranchisement, and drunk with victory, he retired from office the foremost statesman of his country. The second was the period of four years that elapsed between his resignation and his death, when, although he had nothing left of his former army but the staff, although he was detested by the mass of his former followers, although he was aloof from and indeed above party connection, his voice was the most potent and trusted in the country. But when he was in office with a majority behind him, though he achieved

great things, he was always in a false position, always marching with confident utterance and intrepid bearing to an inevitable abyss. There were in consequence two great catastrophes. In 1828 he had been the principal opponent, as he had been for many years, of the Roman Catholic claims, and in 1829 he was the minister who passed through Parliament a measure for the satisfaction of those claims. In 1841 he commenced his term of office as the champion and leader of the Protectionist party, and concluded his term of office in 1846 by putting an end to Protection and the party.

With regard to these two salient points there will always be a controversy as eternal as the Junian or the bimetallic, that of the Iron Mask or the candlesticks of Hugo's saintly bishop. It is not denied that on both occasions the policy was right, though, strangely enough, seventy

years after the interment of one of these questions, and fifty years after the funeral of the other, there appear to the attentive observer more symptoms of anti-Romanist and anti-Free Trade fanaticism than at almost any period in the interval. But though it is not denied that the policy was right, it is and always will be stoutly contested whether Peel was the minister to carry it out. It is not our intention to examine this discussion in detail. Neither party to it will ever convince the other, so in itself it is fruitless and endless. Moreover, before engaging in it, it is necessary to examine not merely the history of each question in detail, but also the nicest issues of political conscience, and even political casuistry. Still, it is impossible to pass it by altogether, as it is capital in any survey of Peel's career. One point at any rate is clear, that a favourable verdict on the first transaction

does not necessarily imply a favourable issue on the second, and, to some apprehensions, makes it more difficult. Granted that he was right in the first transition, he should not have repeated it: the character of public men cannot stand two such shocks: we incline as it were to the old verdict of "Not guilty, but don't do it again."

The briefest recital of the familiar facts will suffice. Wellington, with the concurrence of Peel, had in January 1828 formed a ministry on the plan of Liverpool's, leaving open the question of Catholic Emancipation. Three months afterwards, the section favourable to Emancipation resigned; a resignation, it should be noted, which could easily have been averted by Wellington, who, in his military fashion, treated the disquieted Huskisson as a deserter. Peel declares that but for this resignation he should himself have resigned,

in consequence of a narrow vote in the House of Commons favourable to the Roman Catholics. The resignation of the "Catholic" ministers from power, strangely enough, resulted obliquely in Emancipation. For one of the offices they had resigned was accepted by Vesey Fitzgerald, who had in consequence to vacate his seat and seek re-election for Clare. He polled all the forces of ascendancy, the gentry to a man, and the fifty-pound freeholders: the constituency was held by an overwhelming military force. But O'Connell, though incapable of a seat in Parliament, was returned, on a wave of national uprising, at the head of the poll. This one election let the ocean through the Protestant dykes, and made further resistance, in the opinion of Peel and Wellington, impossible.

The philosophical observer cannot help here turning his gaze for a moment fifty-eight years forward. In 1828 one Irish



election was held to warrant Peel in a great change of policy: in 1886 eighty-five were declared insufficient to justify Mr. Gladstone.

To return to Peel. He came at once to the conclusion that the election opened up the whole Irish question. He considered it, to use the words in which Cornewall Lewis concisely summarises his views, "as a national and not a religious question. Not merely the removal of disabilities from a body of religionists, but the pacification of Ireland was at issue." At the same time he determined to resign. These views he communicated to the Duke of Wellington in August 1828. The Duke answered briefly, and did not combat Peel's desire to resign; indeed, he expressly acquiesced in it. And so matters went on through that dark and distracted autumn, varied only by the removal of the Lord High Admiral and the Viceroy

of Ireland; for the Duke, from high notions of discipline, had in those days a passion for removals. But the dismissal of Anglesey in no degree affected the resolution of Peel and Wellington that the Roman Catholic question must be settled, nor the apparent agreement that Peel himself must go. A strange incident now made Peel waver as to his resignation. In January 1829 the Duke endeavoured, at an interview, to persuade the Primate and the Bishops of London and Durham to acquiesce in a measure for Catholic Emancipation. The prelates refused. Thereupon Peel, in an evil hour, as we think, for his own fame, fearing that the King was behind the Bishops, or might base a veto on the Bishops, wrote to Wellington to offer to continue in office should his retirement, in the Duke's opinion, be an insuperable obstacle to the prosecution of his policy. The Duke of course eagerly

replied that it would be, and Peel remained.

We are here compelled to part company for a moment from Mr. Parker. He thinks that the Duke's letter left Peel no option. But it was in truth Peel's own letter that had this effect. He made the offer to remain when the Duke had long agreed that it was necessary that they should part. Conscious as he was of enormous difficulties, Wellington eagerly clutched at Peel's suggestion; it is not too much to say that in common politeness he could scarcely have done otherwise. It was not the Duke who bound Peel, but Peel who bound himself. To us, anxious as we are to concur with so real an honesty of character and purpose, it seems that the reasons adduced by Peel are inadequate to explain or condone his course. In May 1828 he had been the champion in Parliament against the Roman Catholic claims; somewhere

between May and August 1828 he had been convinced that those claims must be admitted; in August 1828 he was not less convinced that he could not decently be the minister to settle them, and remained in that conviction till January 1829. Then the attitude of the Bishops made him fear a declaration of *non possumus* from the King, and so he agreed to remain. In the letter itself it may be noticed that there is no mention of such an apprehension. That does not appear to have transpired till 1831, when Peel alluded to it in the House of Commons. And he proceeded to ask what, had he resigned, and the King had said to him, "You advise this course, and ask me to sacrifice my opinion and consistency, why will you not make the same sacrifice?"—he could have replied. As the speech is reported his point is not clear, for the sacrifice of opinion and consistency would be made by Peel

whether in or out of office. But it is obvious that the King was supposed to intimate that, as he was compelled to sacrifice his convictions and remain King, Peel, in making the same sacrifice, should remain minister.

All this seems to us shallow reasoning, and to indicate some self-delusion on the part of Peel. It is in the first place obviously irrational to confuse the positions of a constitutional Sovereign and a constitutional minister. Constitutional Sovereigns are often compelled to agree both to measures and to men of whom they disapprove; but there is no question of their retirement. But a minister who considers a measure inevitable, which he has always opposed, has no other course honourably open to him. This Peel himself felt both in 1828 and 1845, though on neither occasion did he definitely withdraw.

But Peel urges, or seems to urge, that

had he retired the King would have found the courage to declare publicly that he would never consent to Emancipation. We see, we confess, but little grounds for such an apprehension. Unnerved as he was, with the fear of rebellion in Ireland, with the army open to doubt, with the great captain of his country and the Protestant champion both against him, with no one indeed to rely upon but the forces of fanaticism, not more violent than feeble, we do not believe that the King would have done anything of the kind. The Duke of York had, indeed, made such a declaration, printed on silk, stamped on pottery and pocket-handkerchiefs, applauded at the banquets of bigots. But the Duke of York was both less responsible and more intrepid than the King. The only reason, in fact, which Peel seems to give for his belief is that the King would have founded such a veto on the hostility of the Bishops, and,

of course, the House of Lords. For this hypothesis we can find no foundation whatever. Nor in any case can we see how the question whether Peel was in or out of office when supporting the Bill could have made any material difference in the King's attitude. It is rather our firm conviction that Peel out of office could have given the Bill a much more potent advocacy than as a minister: his arguments would have been as efficacious; his conviction more manifestly pure; he would have prevented the cancer of personal suspicion, and he would have maintained beyond all question his character as a public man. In fine, we agree with Peel in August 1828 and disagree with his recantation of January 1829.

In point of fact we can scarcely doubt that Peel deluded himself. He sincerely believed, as all men do at times, and as some, like Althorp, do really and always,

that he disliked office. In December 1845 he speaks of his loathing of office. But we believe, on the contrary, that he was unconsciously attached to office, and for the highest motives : that he enjoyed official work knowing how well he did it : that he liked leading the House of Commons because he knew how well he did it : that he greatly preferred the fruitful task of administration to the spent candour of criticism : that, to sum all, he was convinced that as a minister he could render excellent service to his country. He did not go so far as Chatham, and believe that he alone could save the country, but he felt that his rectitude and capacity would always tide his country over a difficult crisis.

Then, as the session drew near, he began to realize that the great measure would have to be framed by another, and carried through the Commons by another,



certainly inferior, hand. Under the mastery of these feelings he wrote to Wellington, and offered to remain. It does not seem to have occurred to him that out of office he could have taken as great a share as he chose in constructing the Bill, and that out of office he could have taken a much more weighty part in carrying it than he could as a minister. He could, in fact, as a private member have sheltered and assisted the Duke's Government, just as from 1846 to 1850 he sheltered and assisted the Government of Lord John Russell.

All this, it may be said, is pure hypothesis. But in a discussion of this kind, where hidden motives and inconsistent action have to be considered and reconciled, it is necessary to have recourse to conjecture; we cannot, indeed, when the documents are exhausted, employ any other guide.

In 1845-46 the circumstances were somewhat different. Peel resigned, not because

of the inconsistency of his proposing the abolition of the Corn Laws, which his party was sworn to defend, but because he thought that he required a unanimous Cabinet to help him to carry his measure. In 1828 he had written: "I have been too deeply committed on the question—have expressed too strong opinions in respect of it . . . to make it advantageous for the King's service that I should be the individual to originate the measure." In 1845–46 he does not seem to have felt this difficulty. And having resigned, and the Whigs having failed to form a Government, he may have felt that he was on stronger ground. In any case, he resumed office with buoyancy, and, as we have been told on high authority, confidently reckoned on carrying his party with him. So far, it may be said that the Whigs had had their chance, and that it therefore became a matter of absolute necessity that Peel should return and carry the measure to

avert a famine. It is difficult to resist this view. Nor is it necessary to weigh whether Peel might not have given larger promises of support to Russell, for Russell inexplicably renounced his task, because he could neither satisfy Grey nor proceed without him. Russell seems, if we may judge from his explanation at the opening of the session, to have required two conditions to enable him to form a Government: stronger assurances of support from Peel, and complete unanimity among his own colleagues. Both requirements denoted a sanguine nature. But, so far as Peel was concerned, it must be felt that, in view of the crisis and of the fact that Russell was in a considerable minority, his assurances of support should have been as ample as possible. Russell, however, failed, and Peel returned.

There seems, then, a clear case of necessity. But it is impossible to avoid the feeling that there is something extremely

unfortunate, if not sinister, in the fate which drove Peel a second time to carry, as minister, a measure of which he had been the principal opponent. And it is obvious from the remarkable letter which Graham addressed to Peel in December 1842 that Peel and his closest intimates had foreseen for three years the inevitable change, and had viewed it calmly. "The next change," wrote Graham, "in the Corn Laws must be to an open trade": this seventeen months after Peel had entered office as the last hope of the Protectionists. "But," he adds, "the next change must be the last; it is not prudent to hurry it; *next session is too soon*; and, as you cannot make a decisive alteration, it is far better to make none." We have not the answer to this, or the letter which elicited it. But it is impossible to doubt that it represents the views of Peel. Peel, therefore, amid every outward semblance of political prosperity, was doomed.

The leader of a party pledged to Protection, with the clear consciousness that his next step, which might at any moment be taken, must be to Free Trade, he was, in 1842 and for three years onwards, standing on gunpowder ready to explode. He was pontiff of a church with the conviction of being in truth a heretic. It is possible, or even probable, that he felt confident that the course of events would soon convince his followers as well as himself—that he was only anticipating that conviction. If so, we can only say that he little understood the temper of the agrarian knights behind him. They, at any rate, knew what they wanted and what, so long as was possible, they intended to maintain. They did, indeed, suspect their leader's hesitation. But they were determined that their force should not merely intimidate the enemy, but keep that leader, whether willingly or not, in his place. Should he falter, their weapons

should prick him forward, or, if necessary, hew him as a traitor. So when he suddenly appeared before them, not in their uniform, but in the clothes he had a second time appropriated from the bathing Whigs, they had no thought but revenge. We can hardly, then, be surprised at the attacks which were made on him in 1846. Lord John Russell summed it all up in his dry, drawling way:—

I cannot express surprise or wonder at any warmth or vindictive feeling being directed against the right honourable gentleman, because in his political career he has done that which perhaps has never happened to so eminent a man before. He has twice changed his opinion on the greatest political question of his day. Once when the Protestant Church was to be defended and the Protestant Constitution rescued from the attacks of the Roman Catholics, which it was said would ruin it, the right honourable gentleman undertook to lead the defence. Again, the Corn Laws were powerfully attacked in this House and out of it. He took the lead of his party to resist a change and to defend Protection. I think, on both occasions, he has come to a wise conclusion, and to

a decision most beneficial to his country ; first when he repealed the Roman Catholic disabilities, and, secondly, when he abolished Protection. But that those who followed him—men that had committed themselves to these questions, on the faith of his political wisdom—on the faith of his sagacity, led by the great eloquence and ability he displayed in debate—that when they found he had changed his opinions and proposed measures different from those on the faith of which they had followed him—that they should exhibit warmth and resentment was not only natural but I should have been surprised if they had not displayed it.

Peel, in the memoir which he himself prepared, has left us his defence. It amounts simply to this: that his duty to the nation was greater than his duty to the party. As regards the grave but minor charge that he did not try and take his party into his confidence, his defence seems to us to be words and merely words, a fog through which there flashes the one clear sentence, “I should have failed in carrying the repeal of the Corn Laws.” It was obviously then as a question of strategy

that he refused his confidence to his followers. He had no right to be surprised that they withheld theirs from him. Nor is it pleasant, bearing in mind our conviction that Peel's unconscious attachment to office was greater than he knew, to remember the remark inferred or recorded by the Prince Consort: "Peel . . . says to himself, 'the minister who settles the Corn Laws is not so easily turned out.'" We would rather he had said, "History will wish to forgive any thing to the minister who settles the Corn Laws."

But we return to the larger issue. Peel held that his duty to the nation was greater than his duty to his party. So stated, the proposition is a meritorious platitude, and one of which party men cannot be too often reminded. But all depends on the application; for it may be employed for the basest as well as the sublimest purposes. We can conceive a minister think-



ing it his duty, in some agony of his country, to sacrifice his party, his future, his fame, nay, his good name, as Brutus sacrificed his sons. On the other hand, such a maxim might easily be utilised to cut at the very root, not of party alone, but of political honour. A political knave or a political mountebank might perennially dwell on the same note to excuse every tergiversation. "Pledges, my dear sir, promises, nay, even principles, what are they in comparison with my duty to my country?" Peel, with a high consciousness of his aims and character, saw nothing of this. To himself he was saying, "Perish my party, let me save my country." But parties do not like perishing, and always see more available and comfortable methods of saving the country.

So the year 1846 was destined to be fatal to high principle in politics. Peel, with the view of saving his country, betrays

his party. His party revenges itself on him by a coalition as discreditable as that of North and Fox. And the mischief does not end with the moment. Twenty-one years afterwards, Peel's bitterest censor, from the point of view of political consistency, imitated his tactics with that fidelity which is the sincerest form of flattery. "First pass the Bill and then turn out the Ministry," said Mr. Disraeli in 1867. This was Peel's attitude in 1846. The year 1846 scarcely seemed perilous to political principle, the retribution was so swift and severe. But it produced 1867. From the transactions of 1867 English public life received a shock which it has scarcely recovered.

Our view is that Peel did not exhaust the alternatives before returning to office. We think that he should have reasoned thus: "Nothing but Free Trade in bread-stuffs, promptly given, can avert a famine

in Ireland, but I am the last person who should pass the measure; for I cannot a second time be placed in the position of a minister betraying his political position. All that I can do, I will do. I will co-operate with any Ministry that will take the necessary steps, and give it my cordial support. If I am consulted, and I must inevitably be consulted, I will give my best counsel. I will do anything and everything, except remain in office." We cannot doubt that, had Peel used this language, Lord John Russell would have disregarded or overcome the hesitations of Grey, would have formed a Government, and have passed the Bill. In any case we hold that it was Peel's duty to try every conceivable and inconceivable combination to obviate the necessity of his remaining minister, and so lowering the standard of English public life.

Peel thought differently. He considered

himself absolved and freed by a genuine resignation, followed by the failure of the Opposition, and the apparent impossibility of any other combination. Nor is it possible to judge him hardly. It is difficult for a minister to exercise an absolutely clear and unbiassed judgment, when the horror of famine is upon him, and when the literal rules of the political game appear to have been observed. Moreover, he had hoped not to break up his party but to carry it with him; he had also to remember that he was the rock and pillar of essential Conservatism, not merely in Britain alone, but in Europe. This was no light trust and responsibility, and it made him, we doubt not, reluctant to relinquish his post.

So he judged, and we will not judge him. If he deceived himself, he deceived himself nobly, and he wrought an immortal work. He paid moreover the full penalty; he redeemed his reputation by his fall; his

political sins or errors, if sins or errors at all, were condoned by the affection and gratitude of the nation. On the night of his resignation a silent multitude awaited him as he left the House of Commons, and, with bared heads, escorted him home. As he lay dying, a sadder crowd surrounded that home day and night, waiting breathlessly for the tidings of the father of their country. This was his reward. And his expiation became a triumph. The two extremes of political party combined to overthrow him. Both, to use a familiar expression, turned their backs upon themselves, in order to secure his defeat; and both acquired those fruits of victory which they coveted. The Protectionists obtained the desert apples of revenge: the Whigs the more succulent substance of office. Lord John Russell and his followers, including Grey, who now sacrificed his scruples, occupied Downing Street; but

propped and overshadowed by Sir Robert Peel. For then, and now, and for all time, above and beyond that Government and the perished passions of the time, there looms the great figure of the great minister, with feet perhaps of clay as well as iron, but with a heart at least of silver, and a head of fine gold.









